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## Monks - *Demo Tapes 1965*

Label: Munster/Play Loud! Format: CD, LP



1966's *Black Monk Time*, the sole album from American GIs turned musical iconoclasts the **Monks**, has benefited from a ever-rising cultural cachet in recent years via reissues, critical reappraisal and word of mouth, making the journey from a one-in-a-million record collector oddity to a vital touchstone of proto-punk underground rock, with writers and musicians falling over each other to testify to the legend of the Monks' minimalist nihilism and aesthetic shock tactics.

And rightly so, as *Black Monk Time* is undoubtedly an extraordinary record in many ways, but I can't help but think the band's cultural importance is getting a little misinterpreted. Most of the declarations of Monk-Love to turn up in print recently have tended to begin by scribbling a quick sketch of the mid-60s music scene as a realm of upbeat hippy pop and easy-going vibes into which the dark spectre of the Monks pounced out of nowhere with an terrifying outburst of mind-blowing musical barbarism. Take a look at '60s rock that extends beyond the clichés however, and you'll see that the violence of Monk Music was hardly unprecedented in late 1966. In Britain, **The Troggs** had spent most of the preceding two years churning out slabs of their ultra-repetitive caveman bliss, building on the equally raw early work of **The Kinks**. In America meanwhile, the landmark rock'n'roll mentalism of **The Sonics'** first album dropped in '65, and by the end of '66 audiences had been subjected to the buzzsaw distortion of **The Shadows of Knights'** "I'm Gonna Make You Mine", the extraordinary WRONG-ness of **The Elastik Band's** "Spazz" and the speed and acid insanity cocktail that is **Love's** "7 & 7 Is", amongst others. And, unlike the Monks, most of those groups actually scored hits, suggesting that listeners weren't exactly cowering in fear every time some wildman stomped on his new fuzzbox.

Trying to frame *Black Monk Time*, with its fairly conventional lead guitar and organ parts and its tendency to hide unashamedly pretty songs beneath the martial pounding, as a benchmark for garage-rock brutality just doesn't hold up. No, far better to champion the Monks for their ideas and calculated subversion. Their geek-gang mentality and profoundly weird monk attire, their incorporation of stomping, militaristic tempos and jilted, authoritarian yelping, their obtuse and ambiguous expressions of political satire, their mysterioso black album cover - this was most assuredly NOT the way the emerging counter-culture of the mid-sixties usually did business. The timing here is all important of course; if the Monks had emerged in '68 they could easily have been lost amid the innumerable gangs of gimmicky freak-flag flyers rolling up to cash in on the brief major label faux-psychedelia boom. But this is SIXTY SIX we're talking here man, and, as if to prove the point beyond doubt to time-nazis like me, Munster and Play Loud! records have now masterminded the first official release of the Monks demo tapes, serving to push back the genesis of Monk-Music to 1965, as detailed in the documentary film *Transatlantic Feedback* about the Monks which has been eight years in the making. So yes, whilst teenage America was getting down to "Louis Louis" and **Dylan** was pissing off the folkies with his electric guitar, over in Germany our heroes already had their shtick down. And if these demo recordings are perhaps less focused and less aggressive than the versions which were eventually released for public consumption, they are in some ways even more startling.

The key to the Monks genius lies I think in the unprecedented deconstructionist approach to music. Reversing the usual punk-savant formula of untrained delinquents wrestling accidental genius out of their instruments, the Monks were consummate professional musicians, used to playing all night sets of dance band pop as their civilian alter-egos **The Five Torquays**, who took the decision to jettison nearly every building block of conventional popular music, from the melody on down. And it is this deliberate minimalism, aiming to shock, confuse and excite listeners in ways few had attempted before, which helps cement the Monks' true legacy as the originators of a lineage of conceptual outsider pop malcontents that runs from **The Residents** and **Devo** through to **Clinic** and **The Fall**.

The main revelation provided by the Demo Tapes is just how radical and far-reaching this deconstruction was. Some of the songs here are allowed to meander into longer jams than was permitted on *Black Monk Time*, often without interjections from the vocals and guitar which provided the recognisable hooks on the finished album. For several minutes at a time on songs such as "Higgle-dy Piggledy", the sound is stripped down to just the inventive and hyper-repetitive rhythms of the drums and bass and the distinctive thwack of **Dave Day's** banjo, creating an unnervingly primal



sound with scarcely any resemblance to song-based rock'n'roll. This process can be heard to best effect on "Space Age", a song which developed into *Black Monk Time*'s "Blast-Off", but is presented here minus the hokey surf-riff that normalised the album version, but with chiming steel drums and a truly weird echoed recording instead, sounding less like any conceivable kind of rock band and more like a **Moondog** performance produced by **Joe Meek**.

The demos includes several older, previously unheard songs which were presumably dropped from the Monks repertoire for being too much like regular pop songs, but even these are given an uncompromising Monk-Music makeover, emerging like some sort of collapsing carnival nightmare music. "Pretty Suzanne" drips with unhinged acid rock soloing and staccato yelping, whilst "Hushie Pushie" features tripped out a-cappella vocals about a lost cat and instrumental sections that sound absurdly similar to the kind of inventive West African guitar pop which you can be near certain the Monks had never heard, assuming recordings of it even existed at this point (I'm no expert). Add to this the kooky church organ and spoken word introductions that the band or their managers saw fit to tack onto every song here, and truly we have a recording like no other.

The CD is rounded off with two tracks cut some time earlier by The Five Torquays ("There She Walks" and "Boys are Boys"), and the contrast between their groovy '60s pop stylings and the cavalcade of madness which has preceded them is remarkable as it is hilarious. Whilst they are perhaps not, as allmusic.com claims of *Black Monk Time*, "the strangest recordings ever made", the Monks demos are still about as far-out as anyone in the world was getting in 1965. Not so much 'off the wall' in the context of their time as 'buzzing circles around the ceiling giggling to themselves', these songs make essential listening for any connoisseur of the strange and inexplicable.

**-Ben Haggar-**